

First PREF Grads Celebrate; Prepare For Future Freedom

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[As Published in The Flyer Group, November 20, 2006](#)

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J. David Donahue,
Commissioner

PLAINFIELD - The first batch of graduates from the Plainfield Educational Re-entry Facility vocational education program received their certificates last week, just one of many steps along the road to recovery for each of them.

The purpose of the re-entry facility is to prepare incarcerated men to be contributing members of society upon their release. It is a pilot program, but Indiana Department of Corrections officials say they have high hopes for its success.

Graduating from the vocational program does nothing to decrease their sentence. Each of the men must serve his time before being released. The program just helps them better prepare for life outside the walls by training them in a skill and providing them with a job, inside the facility and until they are released, so they can add real-world work experience to their resume.

J. David Donahue, commissioner of the Indiana Department of Corrections, attended the short ceremony last Thursday. Since being appointed to his position by Gov. Mitch Daniels in January 2005, Donahue has maintained a stable budget at IDOC while implementing programs designed to improve the quality of the system and serve the public trust.

In his speech, Donahue told the men, "This is not going to be easy, but we want you to know your family, your community, will stand by you."

He was also quick to remind the participants that each of them are in charge of their own destiny. The success or failure of each will be determined by the amount of work they are willing to put into it, he said.

Donahue takes his work on the PREF program very seriously. He said it is the best means he has to protect his neighbors, his family, and all of the residents of the state.

"People don't realize it, but corrections is actually all about public safety," Donahue said. "What good are we doing for the community if we lock these guys up for a while and then just dump them right back on the street again without giving them the skills they need to succeed; without preparing them to rejoin society and live a normal life?"

He said he understands that re-entry education is a different way of thinking for most people in corrections, but it is no less effective, and no more likely to fail.

"Yes, these men have used bad judgment in the past and must be held accountable for that," he said. "We cannot force success on anyone. We can create an opportunity for these individuals to be successful, but they gotta hustle."

By and large, most of the men in the program are already well aware of the impact one bad choice can have on their life. Many of them have also heard empty promises of support and guidance to help them get their lives back on track.

The situation at PREF, however, is unique even to the most cynical.

At just 22 years old, Elijah Howard has seen enough of the Plainfield Educational Re-entry Facility and is ready to get on with his life. A graduate of the hospitality vocational program, Howard said he is looking forward to applying his new skills.

"I have learned the basic rules of hospitality, how to handle guests and communicate well," he said. "I hope to get a job in the hospitality field, maybe at one of the downtown hotels."

Kendall Stevenson is the proud father of a smiling, one-month-old baby boy. Nobody needs to remind him how important his future is, he said he already understands the role he will play in the life he created and truly appreciates the people who have helped him prepare for that future.

"These people gave us hope, they gave us a chance to do something better with our lives, but it's up to us to do something with it," he said. "My goal now is to get out of here and raise my son."

At 60-years-old, Eddie Cannon was one of the oldest graduates from the program. He said the opportunity PREF provides the men is real, but so is the risk that some of them will not take full advantage of it and soon return to the system.

"They are really trying, they are really helping these guys and that's great," he said. "Some of the guys are really getting into it and really want to change their lives, but that change won't really begin until they get outside, and gotta face their old buddies and the people that got them into trouble in the first place.

"If they win or if they lose, it's going to be up to the individuals to decide which way they're gonna go." In remarks to the gathered graduates, their friends, family and well-wishers, PREF Superintendent Mike Lloyd said he was none to sure of the program when he first signed on, but knew that anything they could do to help was better than doing nothing at all.

"I'll admit it, when I was first asked by Commissioner Donahue about re-entry, I didn't even know how to spell it: Was it two words; with a hyphen or not?" he said.

Ultimately, he said, the success of the program will be determined by the success of the men who pass through it. And that, he said, is mostly out of his hands.

"I am not an enabler," he said. "We can give these guys the skills to do something constructive with their lives, but ultimately it's up to each one of them to make the right choices, the right decisions in their lives."

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.

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Content Last Updated:

November 21, 2006